

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION

Joseph A. Curtatone
Mayor

Staff
Bryant Gaspard

Commissioners
Claudia DeAndrade
Patrice Faulkner
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman
Natasha Sierra

Meeting Minutes
March 25, 2021
Via GoTo Meeting Webinar
Online Video Platform
04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:16 pm.

Attending: FHC members Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman and Patrice Faulkner; City staff, Bryant Gaspard.

Minute distribution (upon acceptance) to: FHC members and others attending; also posted to City website.

I. Standing Agenda Items

Meeting Minutes: Members reviewed draft minutes from the February 25, 2021 meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard. Dennis Fischman made a *motion* to accept the minutes which was seconded by Rona Fischman and unanimously *approved*.

Facebook page update: One of the Facebook posts that Dennis discussed was the question of the week regarding if a landlord can choose to not rent to people under the age of 25. The answer is no. Age is a protected class under the Massachusetts fair housing laws. However, there are some exceptions. Minors are not protected and the protections do not extend to residency in state or federally-aided housing for the elderly or to housing intended for use as housing for persons 55 years of age and over, or to housing for individuals age 62 or over.

The other question of the week was about what a person should do if they think they have been discriminated against. The answer was to contact the Fair Housing Program Specialist for the City of Somerville in the Housing Division.

The Facebook post that had the most engagement was an article about the Department of Housing and Urban Development sharing that it will investigate complaints of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, expanding civil rights protections for LGBTQ people seeking housing or temporary shelter.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners that there was a housing discrimination complaint received in March, but it was more of an informal complaint. The constituent mentioned that they did not want to move forward with a formal complaint that could be submitted to the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) or any other agency.

The complainant shared that she was discriminated against by a housing provider in the City based on the protected class of disability. She added that the property managers contacted her about noise complaints they were receiving from her neighbors. She informed Bryant that the noise was not occurring during building quiet hours, but rather in the daytime. She attributed some of the noise to her oldest child who is learning remotely and has a disability and her infant child crying. Bryant informed her that it may be useful to contact the local school department and ask for a letter stating that her son is learning from home and submit a reasonable accommodation letter to the building managers. He added that he would follow up with the constituent if the problem persists.

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant reiterated to the Commissioners that the Know Your Rights-Fair Housing presentation has been postponed to April 8th at 5:30 pm and will be held virtually. He shared that he and Rona will be presenting along with Lee Erica Palmer, an Attorney from Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services. Nicole Eigbrett, the Director of Community Organizing for the Community Action Agency of Somerville (CAAS) will host the presentation.

Bryant informed the Commissioners that the discussions on revising the current zoning ordinance to address fair housing and displacement will occur, but a time and date have not been set. He emphasized that the Fair Housing Commission should be involved in these discussions along with other City staff. As he shared in previous meetings these discussions are partly based on the initiatives taken by the Boston City Council to incorporate fair housing and displacement within their zoning ordinance.

Bryant shared that an Attorney at De Novo, which is a legal services agency in Cambridge reached out to him about housing discrimination testing. The attorney shared that she is part of a working group looking to do some test cases on Source of Income discrimination which is a protected class under Massachusetts law. Bryant told the Commissioners that if they know anyone who has faced that sort of discrimination and is member of the protected class to forward their name and contact information to him.

Lastly, Bryant informed the Commissioners that he will likely present the FY'20 Fair Housing Commission Annual report to the Housing and Community Development Committee (standing committee of the Somerville City Council) in April which is Fair Housing Month. He shared that the Commissioners are welcome to attend the meeting.

III. Announcements

Bryant announced that the City has hired Denise Molina Capers as the first Director of the Racial & Social Justice office. The Racial & Social Justice office is brand new and was created and budgeted for by the City Council. The second announcement was that there is a new affordable homeownership opportunity available at 27 Cutter St #27D through the Inclusionary Housing Program. The unit is a two bedroom condominium at 80% Area Median Income (AMI) and applications will be available starting on March 30th and are due on April 29, 2021 by 2pm.

The third announcement was that even though there is no longer a state moratorium on evictions there is still a federal moratorium based on CDC guidelines. Additionally, the Mayor of Somerville has

signed a moratorium on physical evictions in the City because of the ongoing pandemic. Lastly, Dennis shared that since the 2021 City wide elections will take place it would make sense for the Commission to create some sort of questionnaire. He added that various people are running for a Somerville City Council seat and it would be great to get these candidates on the record about fair housing/housing discrimination. Once the questionnaire has been completed the findings will be published. Patrice will take the lead on drafting questions for the candidates.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Patrice Faulkner and seconded by Rona Fischman and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:00 pm.